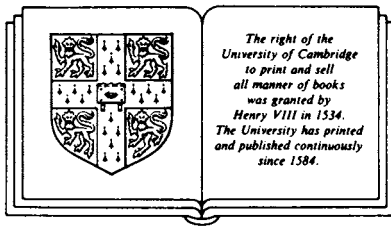


The American Abraham

*James Fenimore Cooper and
the Frontier Patriarch*

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Introduction

The literature of frontier settlement is dominated not by the solitary woodsman in the tradition of Natty Bumppo but by the pioneer patriarch – the American Abraham – who leaves the society of his forefathers to establish his family in the wilderness. Like the famous *isolatoes* of our literature, the American Abraham strikes out for the West, but for him the migration is strategic rather than an essential part of his being. Whereas Natty feels a centrifugal pressure repeatedly impelling him to a distant orbit, the patriarch is driven by the centripetal impulse of his own will to seize authority at the center. While Natty and his successors live alone, in the open air, in a Concord cabin, in an iron cot in Yoknapatawpha County, the patriarch must group people around him and bind them to his vision in order to feel his destiny – at Templeton, at Rancho de los Muertos, at Sutpen's Hundred.

In general, James Fenimore Cooper's romances of frontier settlement pass over the earliest intrusions of white civilization into the wilderness, made by hunters and military men, to focus instead on the first communities, their growth, and their gradual reabsorption into the national or colonial culture from which the patriarch and his followers had originally ventured. In that "intermediate space," Crèvecoeur had proposed, an observer "might contemplate the very beginning and outlines of human society, which can be traced nowhere now but in this part of the world" (12). If for a moment we accept Edwin Fussell's proposal that the hero of the Leatherstocking tales represents

"America as it ought to be," then the frontier patriarch and his settlement represent a social experiment in which Cooper assesses different balances of authority and freedom that might enable American society actually to realize and perpetuate its possibilities.

Over the course of his career, Cooper returned to tales of patriarchal settlement more often even than to the wilderness of the Leatherstocking tales. When conjoined with romances of the Revolution and the sea – all dominated by the issue of patriarchal authority – the settlement novels gain still more prominence. Although they lack a single unifying character like the Leatherstocking, their thematic cohesion and their common focus on recurring representations of the American Abraham properly give them the character of a series. Over the course of Cooper's career, he moved from one series to the next in fairly regular swings across a point of equilibrium imaginatively charted by the tensions contained within *The Pioneers* and *The Prairie* – the two romances claimed by both series. From *The Pioneers* (1823) he moved into the darker wilderness of *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826); after renewing his study of the patriarch in *The Prairie* (1827), he devoted himself fully to it in *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* (1829). On his return from Europe he revived Natty Bumppo in *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841). He then closely paralleled *The Wept* in *Wyandotté* (1843) before extending his interest in frontier settlement into the four-generation family chronicle of *The Littlepage Manuscripts*, including *Satanstoe* (1845), *The Chainbearer* (1845), and *The Redskins* (1846). As the concluding romance of the patriarchal series, *The Crater* (1847) reveals the strong psychic connection between the two series – between isolato¹ and patriarch.

Examining the issue of authority from the earliest years of Cooper's career to near its close, the tales of frontier settlement offer insights into the relationship between Cooper's art and his evolving position in family and society. In *The Protestant Temperament*, a study of American families over two centuries, Philip Greven argues that a person's response to political and religious authority in society is influenced in predictable ways by his or her adaptation to authority within the family – that an adult's trust or distrust of civil authority is influenced by the particular

mixture of authority and affection shown by his or her father during childhood. Although Greven's particular categorization of familial styles and his assertion of their continuity beyond the usual bounds of historical periods have been considered controversial, his central premise remains of essential importance to the study of families in literary works. In Cooper's case, the familial images within the novels of frontier settlement serve to negotiate between the powerful childhood presence of Cooper's father and issues of social and political authority he faced as an adult. In thinking of literary works as a form of imaginative negotiation with authority, I have tried to look beyond childhood sources of identity and to avoid a static view of Cooper's psyche. This study stresses the ideas that a person's role within the family changes with age and that these changes, in turn, establish altered alignments with the parental figures of the psyche. I have tried to keep before myself and my readers a sense of an evolving progression from Cooper's childhood dependence on a father of unquestioned patriarchal stature, to his own assumption of paternal authority as a husband and father, to his claims of authority over the American reading public, and finally to his frustrations at the loss of public authority at the end of his career.² In this sense, the history of Cooper's frontier patriarchs delineates the interaction of his life and art.

Cooper and writers following him seized on the intersecting images of patriarchal family and frontier because of their extraordinary synecdochic power in our culture.³ The metaphor of the patriarchal family and its Lockean modifications permeated political and educational theory as well as partisan rhetoric during the Revolutionary and Constitutional debates and those leading to the Civil War. To a writer of fiction, the interplay of family and society offered a ready-made metaphor. It had been secured in the minds of readers as a principal analogical pathway between private and public experience.⁴

Early New England societies depended on the premise that political and ecclesiastical authority derived from the authority of the father over his family; the family was in fact the "very *First Society* that by the Direction and Providence of GOD is produced among the Children of Men" (Mather, *Family Religion Urged* 1). The Puritans themselves called attention to the "Me-

taphoric and Synecdochical usage of the words *Father* and *Mother*"; John Cotton's catechism trained children to understand the Father and Mother of the Fifth Commandment as "All our Superiours, whether in Family, School, Church, and Commonwealth" (Morgan 46, 19). And despite differences between dissenters and cavaliers, the founders of the southern colonies shared the same assumptions. The family's place in political theory as the "first and most natural development of the social nature" went back at least to Aristotle, but the connection between family and society was not perceived as something set in the anthropological past (Woodward xxxiv). Families not only made up the "foundation of all societies"; they continued to shape the present in their role as the "Nurseries of all Societies" (Morgan 143). The persistent convictions that circumstances within the family projected themselves into society and that the order of society reciprocally imprinted itself on the family underlay the synecdochic usefulness of the frontier settlement.

By focusing on the patriarchal family, Cooper joined the essential methodological insight of Alexis de Tocqueville to the literary paradigms of historical investigation he found in Sir Walter Scott.⁵ Tocqueville's ultimate value as an observer of America depended less on his acumen as an observer – his data were too scanty for that – than on his theoretical insight into the relationship between a nation's politics and its social conditions. Setting out his plan for *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argued that while a nation's social condition is commonly thought of as the result of political and economic "circumstances," once a social condition is established, it "may justly be considered as itself the source of almost all the laws, the usages, and the ideas which regulate the conduct of nations: whatever it does not produce, it modifies" (I: 46). Tocqueville drew this lesson from Napoleon's unsuccessful effort to placate Europeans with civil reforms; he had been hoisted by the petard of his own Napoleonic codes. They had made his overthrow inevitable, "for in the end political institutions never fail to become the image and expression of civil society, and in this sense it may be said that nothing is more political in a nation than its civil legislation" (II: 193). When he moved from theory to specifics,

Tocqueville, like Cooper, focused on the family: to him, the laws of inheritance – in other words, those laws that treat the family as the basic economic unit of society – should “be placed at the head of all political institutions; for they exercise an incredible influence upon the social state of a people” (I: 47). Crèvecoeur, too, directed his readers to the continuity between generations, although, like Locke and Rousseau, he placed more emphasis on education than on economics: “The easiest way of becoming acquainted with the modes of thinking, the rules of conduct, and the prevailing manners of any people, is to examine what sort of education they give their children, how they treat them at home, and what they are taught in their places of public worship” (113).⁶

When Cooper placed a patriarchal family on the frontier, he raised the metaphoric ante even higher. As Edwin Fussell and Henry Nash Smith have shown, the frontier was the expressive emblem of dialectical tensions between the Old World and the New, past and future, order and liberty – the list goes on – surrounding the invention of a new culture. Novels in which the frontier provides scenario and setting as well as metaphor let writers test, in an almost experimental way, the cohesive or divisive effects of specific social values from one generation to the next.

My first chapter lays out the paradigmatic tensions in Cooper’s ideas about authority by analyzing a work placed at the center of his career, *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish*. This romance marks an important hiatus between the anxieties of a prolonged effort to establish his familial and professional authority and the bitterness of his later career, when the American public increasingly turned away from him. The second chapter circles back to the decade immediately preceding Cooper’s decision to become a writer and investigates the origins of Cooper’s compulsion to meet, over and over again, the issue of authority. Chapter 3 examines how Cooper’s prose style is implicated in his efforts to negotiate with superior male figures, first by looking at the early letters of his childhood and adolescence and then by charting the shifting stylistic strategies he exploited in *The Pioneers* to bring the remarkable history of his father’s frontier enterprises

under the control of his art. Chapter 4 explores the darker vision of *The Prairie*, where, fortified by a string of literary successes, Cooper faced his deepest fears of the patriarch's filicidal threat.

Chapter 5 moves forward again to the later years of Cooper's career. One of the loveliest and most relaxed of Cooper's books, *Satanstoe* investigates the origins of American independence, but it proposes a much less radical version of change than had earlier works like *The Spy*. Disturbed by the sense of personal and political dislocation he felt in common with other American writers during the 1830s and 1840s, Cooper drew an alternative to the patriarchal paradigm. He set forth a model of familial and social development that would reconcile son and father, past and future, tradition and change. The final chapter documents the opposed impulses that met in Cooper's later romances. *The Crater* strains between Cooper's desire to analyze and influence the American scene and his longing to retreat into the more embracing world he preferred to imagine.

This study begins at the center of Cooper's career because in *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* Cooper released the full archetypal power of his frontier paradigm by invoking the story of Abraham. The parallels between pioneer and Biblical founder were deeply rooted in Cooper's sources (Beale vii; Dekker, "Hadley" 219). In the *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Cotton Mather reported that the early settlers habitually invoked the story of Abraham, particularly at moments of crisis in their migration. To quiet their anxieties about leaving Leyden and Europe behind them, the founders of Plymouth had to satisfy themselves that "they had as plain a command of Heaven to attempt a removal, as ever their father Abraham had for his leaving the Caldean territories" (48). Similarly, the founders of Massachusetts Bay, arriving "at Salem, in the year 1629, resolved, like their father Abraham, to begin their plantation with calling on the name of the Lord" (70). The idea that patriarchal authority extended out from the family to society at large originated in the Puritan doctrine that God's covenant with Abraham extended to his entire household: "The germ of all political and ecclesiastical authority" lay in this duty, inherited from Abraham, to reform good behavior in the family (Morgan 135). When Mark Heathcote prays over the still-smoldering embers of his settlement and compares

himself directly to "Abraham of old," he announces his self-conscious place in the Puritan tradition (240).⁷

By emphasizing the parallels between his patriarch and Abraham, Cooper endowed his story with the purpose and scale of an epic. As Abraham was a representative hero of the Judeo-Christian tradition, so Cooper's Puritan patriarch exemplified the underlying values of the new American culture taking its westward way. This deliberate parallel set the stakes high. The conflict between tendencies toward order and toward disorder within the westward impulse became a battle between light and darkness over a paradise, regained or once more lost. Even in those works, such as *The Prairie* and *The Chainbearer*, that concentrate on the antisocial aspects of the patriarchal venture, the sense of epic scale persists. Ishmael Bush and Aaron Timberman may be outcasts and false prophets of freedom, but they claim the stature of their Old Testament names.

To the nineteenth-century observer, the rapidity of the westward exodus and its awesome force seemed to make historical forces visible and brought them to the public's consciousness, in much the same way that Napoleon's conquests, or so Lukács argued, brought a sense of history to ordinary Europeans earlier in the century. Though not often given to contemplations of the Almighty, Tocqueville felt an epic impulse when he witnessed the migration's force: "The gradual and continuous progress of the European race towards the Rocky Mountains has the solemnity of a providential event; it is like a deluge of men rising unabatedly, and daily driven onwards by the hand of God" (I: 398). Tocqueville acknowledges not only the deluge's destructiveness to the native population but its power over Europeans as well. His use of the passive "driven" captures the evolving nineteenth-century feeling that these historical forces had never been controlled even by those who profited by them. For Americans, the epic images of the frontier prefigure later images of controlling forces projected by turn-of-the-century naturalists.

To Cooper, Abraham's story offered a mythic typology of generational conflict and historical change. Although Cooper avoided exact parallels to the Biblical text even in *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish*, two determining episodes in Abraham's life

underlie his evaluations of the frontier patriarch. The first is Abraham's decision to go out from his father's house, leaving the land of his forefathers; the second is his acquiescence in sacrificing Isaac at the Lord's command. At both crises, Abraham's obedience to God is tested against his allegiance to human history – to its past, represented by the father, and to its future, represented by the son. Is an abrupt break with the past desirable or even possible? Does movement imply change, or merely repetition? Does the voice commanding the patriarch have divine sanction, or is it the delusory projection of his own will? Does the rebellion of one generation liberate or enslave the next? These are the questions Abraham's story poses as it takes on archetypal significance in Cooper's work.